

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Imām Aḥmad's Ta'wīl¹

Ustadh Abdullah bin Hamid 'Ali

Released by www.marifah.net 1429H

Imām Abū Hāmid al-Ġhazālī says:

I have heard the reliable Imāms of the Ḥanbalīs in Baġhdād say that Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, may God show him mercy, expressly interpreted three ḥadīths: One of them is, “The Black Stone is God’s right hand in the Earth.” The second is his saying, may God bless and grant him peace, “The heart of the believer is between two of the fingers of the All-Merciful.” And the third is his saying, may God bless and grant him peace, “Verily, I feel the breath of the All-Merciful from the direction of the right hand.”

As for the first ḥadīth, “The Black Stone is God’s right hand in the Earth,” Imām Aḥmad is reported to have said about it as stated by Imām al-Ġhazālī:

The right hand is kissed customarily as a means of drawing near to its possessor, and the Black Stone is also kissed as a means of drawing near to God, be He Exalted! So he drew an analogy for the right hand—not with His being, or with the attributes of His being—but with one of its non-essential occurrences. So He called that a right hand [...]

¹ Excerpt from **‘The Attributes of God’**: ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Jawzi, Abdullah bin Hamid ‘Ali. Amal Press. Pgs 140-145 under section ‘The *Salaf* who used *Ta’wīl*.

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An Objection

After mentioning Imām al-Ġhazālī's citation and explanation of this ḥadīth, Shaykh Muḥammad ibn Sāliḥ al-ʿUthaymīn writes that:

It is a false ḥadīth. Ibn al-Jawzī said in al-ʿIlal al-Mutanāhiya: "The ḥadīth is not sound," and Ibn al-ʿArabī said: "A false ḥadīth. It is not confirmed." Based on this, there is no need to indulge in its meaning.²

The Response

The fact that the ḥadīth is or isn't sound does not detract from the fact that Imām Aḥmad interpreted it. So this contention made by Shaykh al-ʿUthaymīn has no relation to the area of dispute. The argument here is not whether or not the ḥadīth was sound.

A Second Objection

Shaykh Ibn Taymiyya said:

What is more popular regarding [this] report is that it is from Ibn ʿAbbās. He said: "The Black Stone is God's right hand in the Earth. So whoever touches it, and kisses it, then it is as if he has shaken hands with God and kissed His right hand." Whoever ponders over the wording that has been transmitted, it becomes clear to him that there is nothing problematic about it. For he said: "God's right hand in the Earth," and he did not leave it unqualified by simply saying, "God's right hand." The ruling of the expression that is qualified contradicts the ruling of the one that is unqualified. Then he said: "So whoever touches it and kisses it, it is as if he has shaken hands with God and kissed Him." This clearly indicates that the person

² Al-Qawā'id al-Muthlā, pp. 49-52

touching [the stone] did not shake the right hand of God at all. Rather, he was merely equated with the one who shakes God's hand. So the beginning of the ḥadīth and the end of it make it clear that the Stone is not one of God's attributes, be He exalted, as is known to every rational person.³

Response

These comments made by Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya, that the report is more popularly known to be a statement of Ibn ‘Abbās does not change the fact that Imām Aḥmad did in fact interpret it. Furthermore, if it is argued that Imām Aḥmad did not interpret the ḥadīth (whether we ascribe it to the Prophet or Ibn ‘Abbās) then we know that Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya has also interpreted it without even realizing it. So his objections stand as an argument against him as opposed to an argument for him, and his explanation is nothing more than what the overwhelming majority of scholars say about the definition of ta'wīl: “Directing the expression away from the apparent indication to the weightier indication with proof that supports that redirection.”

The proof that diverts a word or expression from being understood according to its original signification is called an “indication” (qarīna). It sometimes appears in line with the original expression or comment, sometimes it appears in a totally different comment, and at other times it can be a characteristic in the speaker that requires this diversion. So, just as Ibn Taymiyya negated that the “right hand” was real due to the fact that the report added the words “in the Earth” (since it is impossible for God to take up residence in his creation) it was also his duty to give the same explanation and express the same impossibility about the Prophet's statement to the slave woman, “Where is God?” when she said, “In Heaven.” For it is impossible for God to exist within His creation. As a matter of fact, Ibn Taymiyya also interprets the preposition “in” in this ḥadīth to mean “over,” just as he interprets the entire expression “in Heaven” to mean “in Highness.”⁴

³ Majmū‘a al-Fatāwā, 6/398

⁴ Refer to Majmū‘a al-Fatāwā: Kitāb al-Īmān/al-‘Itiqād

As for the second ḥadīth, “The heart of the believer is between two of the fingers of the All-Merciful,”⁵ Imām al-Ġhazālī reports that the reliable Ḥanbalī Imāms he met in Baġhdād during his time mentioned that Imām Aḥmad’s interpretation of this ḥadīth was that it meant, “the spirit of the two fingers.” Al-Ġhazālī says:

[...] And it is the spiritual rational finger. I mean that the spirit of the finger is what by which altering things is made easy. And the heart of man is between the touch of the angel and the devil. And by them, God, be He Exalted, alters hearts. So he used the two fingers to indirectly refer to them.

The third ḥadīth interpreted by Imām Aḥmad is, “Verily I feel the breath of the All-Merciful from the direction of the right hand.”⁶

A Third Objection

Ibn Taymiyya says about this, “This narration is a lie on Aḥmad.”⁷

Response

Simply because a scholar may not like what he hears about his Imām does not disqualify the argument, nor does it weaken the narration. It would have been more fitting for Shaykh al-Islām to invalidate the report of Hujja al-Islām, instead of accusing him or those from whom he took the report of lying.

A Fourth Objection

Concerning this ḥadīth, Shaykh Muḥammad bin Sāliḥ al-‘Uthaymīn says:

[The author of] Maqāyīs al-Luġha said: “The breath is every thing that is utilized to give relief from a distress.” So the meaning of the

⁵ Al-‘Uthaymīn agrees that this ḥadīth is Ṣaḥīḥ (Al-Qawā‘id al-Muthlā, pp. 51-52)

⁶ All of this can be verified in Faysal al-Tafrīqa bayn al-Islām wal-Zandaqa of Imām al-Ġhazālī, pp. 83-84.

⁷ Majmū‘a al-Fatāwā, 5/398

ḥadīth would be that God’s granting of relief, be He Exalted, to the believers would be from the People of Yemen. Shaykh al-Islām [Ibn Taymiyya] said: “These are they who fought the apostates and opened up the [different] metropolises. So by them, the All-Merciful gave relief to the believers from the distresses.”⁸

Response

In this instance, both ‘Uthaymīn and Ibn Taymiyya interpret this ḥadīth without realizing it, and establish the proof against themselves that figurative interpretation is permissible and valid, despite the fact that they are in the process of attempting to refute those who permit it. What we can conclude from this, is that in attempting to cast aspersion on the reports, what has actually been achieved is the strengthening of the case for interpreting these reports.

Ibn Kathīr reports in al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya that Imām Aḥmad said about God’s saying: And your Lord comes (Qur’ān 89: 22), “That is, His reward comes.” Imām al-Bayhaqī said, “This is a chain that has no dust on it.”⁹ Imām Aḥmad’s nephew, Ḥanbal, said that he heard him say:

They argued against me on the day of the (great) debate [munāzara], and they said: “Sūra al-Baqara will come on the Day of Resurrection.” He [Imām Aḥmad] said: “So I said to them: “That is merely the reward [of Sūra al-Baqara].”¹⁰



⁸ Al-Fatāwā: 6/396, al-Qawā`id al-Muthlā: 51-52

⁹ 1/327

¹⁰ For this report, refer to Imām al-Rāzī’s Asās al-Taqdīs, p.108, and Dhahabī’s Siyar ‘Alām al-Nubalā: 5/11.